CONVERSATION AT A WELL:
SALVATION SANDWICHES
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Psalm 91
John 4:1–42

"Those who drink of the water
that I will give them will never be thirsty."
John 4:14 (NRSV)

All our Wednesdays are marked by ashes—
of failed hope and broken promises,
of forgotten children and frightened women,
of more war casualties, more violence . . .
we ourselves are ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .

Before the sun sets, take our Wednesdays and Easter us.
Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;
Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.

Walter Brueggemann
Prayers for a Privileged People

In 1966, an eleven-year-old African American boy moved with his parents and family to an all-white neighborhood in Washington, D.C. He wondered what would happen: his parents sheltered him as completely as possible, but nevertheless he had heard frightening stories about what happened when black people crossed what was known as the "color line." One morning shortly after the family settled in their new home, he sat with his two brothers on the front porch. People walked by on the sidewalk, looked directly at them. No one smiled. No one said hello. It confirmed all the stories he had heard. Years later he wrote, "I knew we were not welcome. I knew we would not be liked. I knew we would have no friends here."

But then a white woman walking home from work, on the sidewalk across the street, did the most amazing thing. She smiled. She said, "Welcome." She disappeared into her house and emerged a few minutes later with a tray of drinks and cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwiches. She brought them

across the street and offered them to the anxious, frightened children sitting on the porch steps.

That moment, he wrote later, changed his life. At a critically tense moment in his formation, at a moment of difficult race relations throughout the United States, a simple gesture showed him that a black family could feel at home in this new place, that relationships across the wide gulf of race were possible. He never forgot that moment that changed his life.

The little boy is now a law professor at Yale. His name is Stephen Carter, and he has written a book about what he learned that day. The book is entitled *Civility,* and in it he discusses the loss of civility in contemporary society and concludes that religion could be part of the antidote, the healing. The woman was Sara Kestenbaum, "a religious Jew who was simply doing what her religion told her to do," Carter wrote.

"To this day I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth sweetness of the cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I learned how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever" (cited by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *To Heal a World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, pp. 44–45).

You might say those cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwiches were a lot like what happened to a woman long ago on another hot summer afternoon. It was, for her, life changing. It was "living water."

The first major crisis of the Jesus movement that was spreading rapidly throughout the Middle East and beyond by the end of the first century was who gets in and who is kept out. Traditionally in the ancient world—and occasionally in the modern world—religion is in charge of the issue. The anthropologists tell us that historically it is religion that creates the cultural boundaries for the tribe, clan, society: the stories that define who we are, the rites and rituals that establish our identity, the rules by which we live, the celebrations of birth, initiation, marriage and death. It is the job of religion to tell us who we are by reminding us of who we are not.

So the first crisis of the earliest Jesus movement happened when that traditional basic function of religion was challenged. They were all Jews: Jesus and his disciples and all his followers. They had no reason to assume that following Jesus was anything but a Jewish enterprise. But then Gentiles started to show interest: a Roman centurion here, a Greek merchant there, a Syrian, an Egyptian. A man by the name of Paul would really stir things up by suggesting that God had called him to tell Gentiles about Jesus and invite them in. It was a real crisis. How in the world do you do something like that: invite a stranger in, an alien, an outsider?

The issue emerges in a little story about an event that happened to Jesus and his disciples. In this case, the other—the outsider, the alien—is a close relative and almost, but not quite, a Jew. And part of what you learn from this story is why religious arguments are so contentious, why church fights are so embarrassingly fierce, and why ultimately people have been willing and are willing today to die and to kill for God.

The first hint of trouble here is in the way the story begins. Jesus and his disciples have left Judea, Jerusalem, and are headed home to Galilee because there is brewing opposition to him. The main road home crosses a border with Samaria. Most good Jews took a small detour at that point to avoid stepping a foot in Samaria. It's a little like a church fight, like Catholics and Presbyterian Protestants in Belfast. Samaria used to be part of Israel. But 700 years earlier, the Assyrians conquered and occupied Samaria and instead of honoring tradition imported all kinds of people—other nationalities, other races, other religions. Samaria looked like an ethnic mess to the good people of Jerusalem. Samaria looked like Chicago. To make matters worse, the Samaritans began to fiddle with the rituals and rules of the religion and even suggested that the holy mountain was not Mt. Zion, on which Jerusalem is built, but a mountain in Samaria, Mt. Gerizim. "We have the best holy mountain, the only true holy mountain." "Our religion is the way to God. Yours, at best, is a pale imitation." It grew and deepened and festered over 700 years so that Jews didn't even want to be near Samaritans, didn't want to touch them, eat with them, drink with them—and the feeling was mutual.

So they're walking on the road home and "they had to go through Samaria," the text says, which is not true. There were alternatives. Someone—my guess is that it was Jesus—said, "We're going though Samaria." I think he has something in mind, a point he wants to make; he's on a mission. It's a hot day. They've been walking a long way. They come upon a well—actually everybody on hot days stops for a drink. It's Jacob's well. It's noon. His friends leave him at the well while they walk to town to buy food. He's resting. Here comes a woman with a bucket to get some water. Uh oh. Two big problems: she's a Samaritan, and she's a woman, alone. Jewish men don't talk to unaccompanied women. It's a remarkable story even before spoken.

What happens next is the longest conversation Jesus has with anybody in the Gospels. It begins with a simple request: Jesus asks her for a drink. Actually it's not so simple at all. He's rather carelessly breaking two conventions, crossing two huge boundaries in addition to the boundary he had to cross to get there in the first place. He's talking with a woman—and who knows where that might lead?—and he's proposing to drink from a defiled, unclean, Samaritan cup.

She is stunned. “You know better than that,” she says. “Jews don’t drink from a Samaritan cup.” “I will give you living water,” he says. “How will you do that?” she says. “The well is deep and you don’t even have a bucket.” She’s intrigued. “Tell me more; in fact, I’d like some of that living water.”

Abruptly Jesus changes the subject. “Go get your husband.” Another huge issue is starting to emerge. “I’m not married,” she says. “Right,” he says, “but you have had five husbands”—two over the legal limit of three, by the way—“and the man you are currently hooked up with is not your husband.”

She’s astonished. They talk a little more about whose mountain is the real holy mountain, and Jesus almost brushes off the whole issue by suggesting that God, the God of all people, Jews and Samaritans, seeks the devotion and commitment and heart of people regardless of their tribe, nationality, religion, and obviously gender.

Just then his disciples return with food. They are astonished. What in the world is going on here? We leave him alone for an hour and he ends up talking with a woman, a Samaritan woman.

The best part of the story comes next. She drops her water jar and runs back to her village and tells everyone about this man who knows everything about her, her questionable marital history and the sexual morality issues that come along with it; a man who ignores who she is—a woman, a Samaritan—and engages her in respectful conversation; a man who made her feel whole, acceptable, respectable. So she runs and tell about him and raises a provocative question: “He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”—the savior we’ve been waiting for, that is.

The most remarkable thing: she—Samaritan, woman—is the first Christian evangelist, our very first preacher. “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony,” John says.

Even more remarkable, unthinkable, the Samaritans invite Jesus and his friends to stay with them, and they do, for two days. Jews and Samaritans, eating and drinking together, swapping stories, singing songs, watching the little ones play, preparing food, doing dishes together, and at the end of the day lying down under the same roof together.

It’s almost impossible today to understand the power of that—individual hearts and minds transformed—long-held traditions and rules and conventions transcended, honorable and cultural institutions and practices transformed because of Jesus.

Nobody ever talked like Jesus. Nobody ever did the things he did. Nobody.

It is so radical we still have trouble believing it.

The history of how this story has been interpreted and appropriated is telling. John Calvin, like most men, is fascinated with the woman's marital history and, in his commentary on the text, essentially blames her for her divorces. Obviously, pronounced Calvin, she was a disagreeable and disobedient wife.

Fred Craddock says countless evangelists have had a field day with her, creating a picture of painted lips, heavy mascara, short skirt, obviously trying and failing to seduce Jesus.

The text won't allow it. We don't know a thing about her history, only, as Frances Taylor Gench points out, that it is tragic. What is truly stunning is what Jesus doesn't say: doesn't condemn or even criticize—it's almost as if he doesn't care how many husbands she's had or her current sexual behavior, almost as if Jesus only focuses on her, a woman, a precious child of God, worthy of his attention, worthy of a respectable, respectful theological conversation. And to her, that—his amazing acceptance, his unconditional love, his amazing grace—was like a drink of cool, pure, thirst-quenching water.

Isn't it amazing that, in spite of the fact that the first Christian evangelist was a woman, we refused to allow women to be ordained leaders during most of Christian history, in our Presbyterian history for centuries, until 1954, in fact, and in the case of huge parts of the Christian church, women are still on the outside, unable to be ordained and to serve and to lead?

Isn't it amazing and sad and sinful that in spite of his looking right past her gender and sexual behavior, 2,000 years later we're still insisting that sexual behavior alone is a criteria by which we keep people away from ordination? This woman couldn't pass ordination standards today, particularly in the Presbyterian church.

Isn't it amazing how Jesus, left to his own devices, pushes past convention, crosses theological, ecclesiastical, and political boundaries, and welcomes everyone, no strings attached, no questions asked? And that when he's around ideological enemies, they eat and drink together and become friends?

Is there a word here about civility and how people talk to one another and relate to one another? Is there a word about the common good and the way it is sacrificed today on the altar of social and political ideology? I think so. We are so divided politically, liberals–conservatives, Move On.com–Tea Party, Democrats–Republicans; so divided that important work can no

longer be done because to cooperate and accomplish anything just might bring credit to one party or the other.

Is there a word in this 2,000-year-old story about a man who transcends ideology and ends up eating and drinking for two days with the other, the other party? I think so.

And there is here a very personal word.

I love the story the distinguished African American scholar, philosopher, and theologian Howard Thurman used to tell about the time he and his wife took their two daughters on a trip through the South. At a rest stop, his daughters saw the playground and headed toward the swings. They didn't see, or couldn't read, the sign that said "Whites Only." He patiently tried to explain why they couldn't use the swings, and they began to cry. So just as his mother did for him, he gathered them in his big arms and said, "Listen, you little girls are really somebody. You are so important and valuable to God that it takes the governor and lieutenant governor and the whole state police force to keep you little girls from those swings" (cited by Thomas Long, *Testimony,* p. 63).

That's what Jesus did for a Samarian woman one day long ago.

And it is the basic Christian message, the promise that comes across twenty centuries to you and me this morning.

No matter who you are—self-confident or not sure you are acceptable to others or to God for whatever reason; no matter your upbringing, your lack of a degree from an elite university, your modest job you think is unimportant, your modest income and monetary worth, the color of your skin, your gender or sexual orientation.

No matter where you are on your spiritual journey—regular church member, comfortable with your spirituality and beliefs, or not a member, not sure what you believe, searching, but you're really here because someone told you the music is great.

No matter what you believe or find you cannot believe.

No matter what you are doing with your life at the moment—working or not working; parenting or not parenting; married or not.

No matter what, the radical, unlikely, and absolutely unique message of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God crosses all the boundaries and borders of our life and comes to each of us, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, whoever we have been in the past and who we are now.

It’s like those cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwiches, like the bottled water held to the lips of the Haitian woman rescued from the rubble after a week.

Living water—to know that you are loved and accepted by God in Jesus Christ. All praise to him.

Amen.